

## THE CONDITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABORERS IN ENGLAND

I HAVE no disposition to obtrude my opinion, in any form, so as to give offence. Indeed, it has always seemed to me unreasonable in any case, or on any subject, that the honest opinions of any man should be the occasion of offence, as though we had the same control of our opinions as we have of our limbs; as though we should have any other object, in any matter, but the attainment of truth; and as if there were any way of attaining truth but the utmost freedom of discussion; and, above all, as though men should, under any circumstances, feel at liberty to exercise the same tyranny over the mind which physical force and political stratagem give them over the person.

One cannot help seeing that wealth and prosperity are not always coincident; that wealth is not therefore the infallible index of prosperity. In many cases,—and perhaps it may only be rendered more striking from contrast,—the extraordinary accumulations of wealth on one side are followed by a corresponding depression on the other; while the rich are made richer, in the same proportion the poor are made poorer. As wealth increases, avarice is more powerfully stimulated, and labor more severely taxed. In the richest communities, the price of labor is always the most depressed; and with the increase of luxury the desire of indulgence is quickened with all classes: what might properly be termed luxuries and superfluities become absolute necessities of life, and the expenses of living are proportionally increased to all. We may deplore such results, and deem it easy to suggest a remedy; but what remedy is of general or of practical application? The more artificial the state of society becomes, the more difficult it becomes to provide the means of living; and yet who would return to the state of nature, or abate one tittle in the actual refinements of life? Communities are growing up among us upon the principles of perfect equality of rank, the equal combination of labor, and an entire community of goods; and there are examples, where such communities, bound together by a strong religious tie, and subject to a most despotic government within themselves, have been maintained, and are still flourishing. But without this religious tie, or some strong personal and pecuniary interest, and without an absolute head, does any sober man dream that such communities can

be sustained, excepting within the narrowest limits? or that such principles can be applied, to any great extent, to society at large, without an entire change in the whole structure of society, and, I may almost add, an entire renovation of human nature itself? Far be it from me, however, to suggest that the evils of society are without a remedy, or at least beyond alleviation. Our own country, under a free constitution of government, and with an almost unlimited extent of the most fertile territory, accessible upon the easiest terms, presents, perhaps, the most favorable condition, which has been known, for a security of the rights of labor, and the just fruition of its products; but it would be a great injustice to infer that there are not to be found in England many generous and just persons, devoted to the maintenance of the rights, and the welfare and improvement, of the humble and laborious classes. There cannot be a doubt, that, in a noiseless and unobtrusive way, much is, and infinitely more can be, done for these objects; and the aim of every good man, as far as he has any power, should be to diffuse, to the greatest extent possible, the means of subsistence and comfort to all, and to remove every impediment to the most equal distribution of the products of labor among those whose labor in their production gives them certainly a fair claim upon these products. Now, whether it be by large farms or by small allotments, by plough or by spade husbandry, that mode of husbandry by which the largest amount of product, and at the least expense, can be drawn from the soil, and with the least injury to its productive powers, is to be preferred. This great point is not yet ascertained; and its determination must necessarily be different in different places and conditions. But it is with England a question of tremendous importance, what is to become of the vast accumulations of people, which are continually increasing here at the rate of from seven hundred to a thousand per day. It is impossible to become accurately, though it may be slightly, acquainted with the condition of things in England, the actual suffering for a want of the means of subsistence, which prevails among large portions of the population, especially in some of the agricultural districts, and not to feel that there are powerful elements of disease at work in the social body, whose disastrous effects must presently be felt in all their violence. Men with families dependent upon their labor, earning not more than 7 s., and in some instances even less, per week, and often times with only occasional employment at that rate, present objects of deep interest to a philan-

thropic mind. Men living themselves upon a single meal per day, and that potatoes only, for the sake of keeping a wife and children from absolute starvation,—and there is ample evidence that such cases exist,—present a sad spectacle. What are the remedies for such a condition of things, if remedies there are to be found, it is not within my province, in this case, to discuss. It is a hard lot, where the most severe and unremitted labor will not avail to procure a subsistence for one's self and family, and where, with immense tracts of uncultivated land, the opportunity even of exerting this labor, however cheerfully it might be rendered, is, for any cause whatever, refused or prevented.

The subject, it appears to me,—and perhaps wholly from my being unaccustomed to a condition of things in any degree resembling it,—is daily assuming a fearful aspect; I do not mean of danger to the government,—for the government of the country seems never to have been stronger,—but fearful in its bearings upon the public peace, the public morals, the security of property, and the state of crime. . . .

Colman, H.: *European Agriculture and Rural Economy, from Personal Observation*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 133-35. Boston, Phelps, 1844-1847.